

Introduction—Corona A(e)ffects: Radical Affectivities of Dissent and Hope

by Mattia Fumanti and Elena Zambelli | Corona A(e)ffects: Radical Affectivities of Dissent and Hope, Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

ABSTRACT Right from the emergence of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, national governments and international institutions have been relentlessly qualifying it as an “unprecedented” event. We have been told that the virus sees no color or class and that equal sacrifices from each one of us are and continue to be necessary to contain its spread. We have been instructed to look at the virus in scientific, neutral terms as if we had equal chances of being affected by it—as if its routes, that is, did not follow the roots of sedimented histories of oppression, exploitation, dispossession, and structural violence. This forum departs from such narratives to look at how the current COVID-19 pandemic intersects with other pre-existing and enduring pandemics, such as those produced by racism, capitalism, and speciesism. In building on the emerging critiques by Indigenous, feminist, Black, and queer academics, movements, and activists, the contributions it hosts offer multimedia reflections on affects triggered or evoked by the current pandemic, such as rage, fear, despair, restraint, care, and hope. Coming from different parts of the globe and disciplinary approaches, authors convey the “Corona(virus) a(e)ffects” in multisensorial ways, combining written essays, poetry, videos, and photographs. By contextualizing the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic within a historical legacy of structural violence within and across species, this forum moves beyond deceitfully single-focus and temporally flat narrations. In so doing, it provides a space for the expression of radical affectivities of dissent and hope that its outburst has arguably made only more visible and pressing.

KEYWORDS racism, affect, temporality, pandemic, COVID-19

Almost two years into the COVID-19 pandemic,¹ its impact across the globe continues to highlight and reproduce marked structural inequalities between and within countries. Against the mainstream narrative that we are all equally subject to the risk of infection and death, epidemiological data increasingly demonstrates otherwise.² In the United States, data shows that the pandemic “disproportionately affected racial and ethnic minority groups,”³ and its impact on people in prison was five and a half times higher than on those not in prison.⁴ In high-income countries, people in migration were found to be “at increased risk of infection” and “disproportionately represented among COVID-19 cases.”⁵ Likewise, the impact of the social distancing regime that most governments across the globe adopted to contain the spread of the virus is hitting harder those social groups living under conditions of structural vulnerability. Individuals working in the informal economy have seen their livelihood jeopardized,⁶ and so have people selling sex.⁷ People living in displacement have seen their right to seek asylum curtailed.⁸ Under stay-at-home conditions, “violence against women and girls (VAWG), and particularly domestic violence,

has intensified."⁹ In the US, LGBT adults and their family members experienced "job loss at higher rates than non-LGBT adults."¹⁰ Meanwhile, as some of the higher-income countries are emerging from lockdowns, thanks to a rapid, mass vaccination campaign, the pandemic rages in most other countries, which have received only a fraction of the vaccines administered so far. The health gap is such, that recently, the World Health Organization Director-General defined the current situation as a "vaccine apartheid."¹¹

Departing from the single-focus narration of the current COVID-19 pandemic as the source of an "unprecedented" predicament, we—editors of this forum—align ourselves with voices emerging from Indigenous, feminist, Black, and queer academics, movements, and activists that look at its necropolitics¹² as a further instantiation of the coloniality of power.¹³ In this introduction, we, first of all, contextualize the present within an "enduring time"¹⁴ of intersecting pandemics, such as those produced by racism, capitalism, and speciesism. Next, we take issues with calls for a return to "normality" by questioning in whose name this desire is being reinstated. We then offer some theoretical background for our choice to focus on the affects triggered or evoked by and through the current pandemic, followed by a synopsis of the nine contributions that are part of this forum.

Pandemic Temporalities

First of all, we contend that understanding the current social and political geographies of risk, disease, and death, requires delving into temporalities deeper than the present. In fact, akin to other epidemics and morbidities, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have been following the routes traced by longer histories of oppression, exploitation, dispossession, and structural violence.¹⁵ Seen through these different temporalities, the COVID-19 pandemic becomes another event in the long history of physical and viral colonial invasions, the legacies of which enduringly and disproportionately affect People of Color, Indigenous communities, minoritized, and/or impoverished social groups. Indeed, some Indigenous activists indicted "the deadly politics of capitalism" and the "plague" of colonialism as the actual sources of infection.¹⁶ The juxtaposition between the images of the coffins of the coronavirus victims buried in Manaus¹⁷ and the destruction of the Amazon forest¹⁸ tragically epitomizes how Indigenous people's lives and lands are made disposable and disposed of, along with the futurity we share on planet Earth.

Black people "have been talking about the pandemic of racism for centuries,"¹⁹ and some scholars suggested that to be Black today amounts to carrying—or perhaps more poignantly, to have been inflicted with—"a 'pre-existing condition.'"²⁰ Looking back to the US slavery regime, Brandi Summers suggests "One might even consider the black experience as a kind of never-ending quarantine."²¹ As Christina Sharpe reminds us, for Black people existing in the wake, "the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present."²² However, whilst the wake produces Black death and terror, "we black people, everywhere and anywhere we are, still produce in, into, and through the wake an insistence on existing: we insist Black being in the wake."²³ One cannot help but think of George Floyd's last moments, his pleading "I can't breathe," as a global call to insist on

Black existing in/into and through the wake of the current moment, as shaped by the legacy of intersecting and enduring pandemics.

Whose Normality?

Secondly, and relatedly, we need to interrogate who is the subject uttering the statement that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is “unprecedented.” In other words, as put forward by AIDS activist and queer scholar Gary Kinsman, we need to ask who is the “public” of “public health” and how that “public” is socially constructed to include or exclude people across multiple axes of social differentiation.²⁴ In fact, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has been raging for almost fifty years now. Queer people had to radically reimagine their social worlds to survive it, as they reconfigured the spaces and practices of intimacy, weaved webs of mutual solidarity and care, and turned mourning into a political protest against their erasure and disposability.²⁵ As Hemmings recently underlined, Eve Sedgwick’s writings at the height of the HIV/AIDS pandemic called for the use of the “viral” as a mean to cultivate refusal, resistance, and value “alternative epistemologies as well as lives: ones that are devalued, pushed aside, or mocked. Gossip, knowledges needed for survival, lurking instincts.”²⁶ Sedgwick, Hemmings reminds us, calls these “nonce taxonomies”:

they spread rather than move up or down; they ooze and jump horizontally, along care capillaries and up and down phone trees. They are the technologies of the powerless that let others know what is safe and what (or who) should be avoided. For 1990s Sedgwick, nonce-taxonomies are not metaphors; they are the knowledges that keep people with AIDS alive within communities. They provide circuits of intimacy that are not rooted in hermetically sealed “households” but in chosen family, shared histories and modes of touching others that have always been innovative.²⁷

Yet, in contemporary public discourse, this history and living legacy of painfully hard-won knowledge and practices have been ignored, reflecting the devaluing of queer lives,²⁸ and of the lives of people living in lower-income countries. Eventually, we—editors of this forum—would like to suggest that what qualifies the COVID-19 pandemic as “unprecedented” is less the nature of its effects, such as its deadliness and the adaptive regimes developed to survive it, but more the scale of their impact on the life of the privileged, normative subjectivities living in higher-income countries. Against this background, calls for a return to “normality” appear to us editors and to the contributors to this forum as a form of “cruel optimism”: an attachment to an “ordinary life” that is premised on “the attrition or the wearing out of the subject,”²⁹ and on the continuation of the deadly structural inequalities which it rests upon and reproduces. It is the normality

of clogged highways, filthy air, meaningless work, disorganized health provision, mindless consumption, bulging prisons, abandoned homeless populations, siloed knowledge practices, growth-based economies wrecking the planet, stratification and abjection across race, class, gender, and hemisphere, and overpaid masters of the universe returned to their thrones.³⁰

Affectivities of Dissent and Hope

As the COVID-19 pandemic unraveled, we had to learn to navigate the shift from a world that was “close, collective, viscous, and dirty” to one that, suddenly, “had become distant, individual, dry, and hygienic.”³¹ Amid these uncertain waters, as editors, we found ourselves swinging relentlessly between dissent and trust, hope and despair, loneliness and new forms of mutuality. Eventually, rather than waiting for a definitive resolution to these affective “pandemic swings,” we came to acknowledge that such instability characterizes life not *under*, but *with* intersecting pandemics. Our choice to focus this forum on the affective dimension of this ongoing, complex predicament, recognizes that affects hold together the discursive, the material, and the visceral dimension of human and nonhuman life experience. Affect “arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon.”³² It is “found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, *and* in the very passages of variations between these intensities and resonances themselves.”³³ Following Sarah Ahmed, we conceive affect as a “form of capital” that emerges from the circulation, distribution, and unequal accumulation of emotions “across a social as well as a psychic field.”³⁴ It is, therefore, organized in “affective economies”³⁵ in which human and nonhuman subjects are hierarchically organized based on their intelligibility, visibility, and value. Among humans, these hierarchies reflect and reproduce normative assemblages of gender, race, class, citizenship, sexuality, ability, age, and other markers of social differentiation. Species are likewise hierarchically organized. As Bruno Latour famously argued, the paradigm of humankind’s dominion over nature lies at the heart of white Western colonial modernity and its cognate (racialized) temporality.³⁶ Affects stick differently to different bodies and objects engendering and reproducing different forms and levels of privilege and disadvantage; deservingness to be protected or to be left to die prematurely; to be grieved viscerally or to be lost and disposed of unaffectionately.³⁷

Affects’ effects—or, as we have called them, their “a(e)ffects”—carry genealogies rooted in enduring histories of oppression, exploitation, and dispossession. Inspired by the emerging critiques and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic by Black, Indigenous, feminist, and queer academics, with this forum we editors wished to offer a space to interrogate the narratives of the current predicament as “normality interrupted.” We felt the necessity of doing so amidst dystopian imaginaries forecasting the suppression, *ad infinitum*, of collective expressions of “live” political dissent on public health grounds and the tightening of ever more molecular biopolitical governmentalities. As scholars of colonialism, postcolonialism, gender studies, and critical race theory, we editors looked critically at the flourishing of publications documenting and narrating the COVID-19 pandemic mostly in the style of observational and single-focus diaries. We found these particularly problematic in the context of the recent debates on decolonization and the positionality of white scholars, including ourselves, writing from a position of privilege in academia. The forum became our dissenting response to what we feared would be the flattening out of the pandemic through a particular Western heteronormative gaze.

Joining Jack Halberstam's passionate call to seize the present as a "[t]ime for frenzy,"³⁸ we thus invited academics, artists, and activists to draw from the affective registers of hope, fear, rage, care, desire to reflect on forms and imaginaries of political organizing at the time and in the aftermath of the current pandemic. We called for a scholarship privileging "emotional intimacy"³⁹ and "radical empathy"⁴⁰ as modes of witnessing people's experiences, recording their narratives, and overall, of being in the present—a scholarship whose ethos is oppositional and transformative and oriented towards fulfillment of concrete utopias.⁴¹

Shortly after our call went out in May 2020, the US was shaken by massive protests against police brutality following the murder of George Floyd by Derek Chauvin, a Minneapolis police officer, with demonstrations in support of the Black Lives Matter movement taking place in over sixty countries. Relentlessly, rage against systemic injustices and longings for different futures have been erupting in and/or fueling protests in many parts of the world: against the presidential election results in Belarus; the tightening of already draconian abortion laws in Poland; state irresponsibility in Lebanon in the aftermath of the Beirut port explosion, and many struggles more. As we write this introduction, over a year later, a ceasefire agreement has recently been reached between Israel and Palestinian armed groups in the Gaza Strip, after an eleven-day conflict constituting the latest instantiation of Palestinians' ongoing predicament in the face of a settler-colonial project.⁴² Amid the enduring pandemic-borne uncertainties, one thing appears to us to shine with clarity, and this is that public health restrictions on gatherings have not hindered many people's desire to address and overcome long-held grievances by collectively taking to the streets.

The Contributions in this Forum

This forum contributes to a growing interdisciplinary scholarship on political affectivities⁴³ by expanding the repertoire of affects through which humans can collectively imagine and feel the possibilities of dissent and hope within and across species. Coming from different parts of the world—Europe, the Middle East, Australia, and the US—and different disciplines, authors used a range of means to convey the "corona(virus) a(e)ffects" in multisensorial ways, combining written texts with audio/visual materials. Some of these contributions speak of the affectivities emerging in the moment of reckoning with one's dissent with the world-as-experienced. Others speak of the texturing of relations of care emerging among and/or across species, as a "praxis of radical politics that provides spaces of hope in precarious times."⁴⁴ Others suggest looking at the times we are going through as one in which new ways of imagining a collective otherwise can take root.

The first set of four contributions explores the political affectivities of care and dissent emerging in the unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic, as it intersects with other enduring pandemics.

"Public Space as Infrastructure of Care: The Affective Dynamics of Protomagias Square During the Pandemic," < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/public-space->

[infra-structure-care-protomagias-square-pandemic-kallianos-karathanasis/](https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/infra-structure-care-protomagias-square-pandemic-kallianos-karathanasis/) by Yannis Kallianos and Pafsanias Karathanasis, explores the transformation of a public square in Athens, Greece, into a space shaping and engendering "*infra-structure* relations and networks of care." Against the risk of retreat into the realm of the private and the privatized fostered by the recasting of physical proximity as a public (health) threat, the authors suggest reading the grassroots collective practices of self-care and care for each other they witnessed emerging as "alternative and 'different ideas of publicness.'"⁴⁵

"On Witnessing a Riot," < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/on-witnessing-a-riot-brooks-richardson/> > by Andrew Brooks and Michael Richardson, discusses the affectivities arising and molded through the global circulation of a mobile phone-recorded video of the protests that erupted in Los Angeles following the murder of George Floyd. In the vibrancy of the affectivities released and produced through these images, the authors see the potentialities of a new albeit yet undefined structure of feeling⁴⁶—one which "dissolves oppressions instead of sustaining them."

In "Feelings, Fascism, and Futures," < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/feelings-fascism-futures-enzerink/> > Suzanne Enzerink delves into the racialization of "restraint," which is conceived both as "the nerve center of our feelings" and, following Bonilla-Silva, a category "produced by and routed through racial domination."⁴⁷ This contribution shows the multiple ways in which the practices and representations of political restraint or lack thereof were racialized during and beyond the pandemic, focusing in particular on the effects of structural racism in the US and institutional stagnation in Lebanon. Notwithstanding (realist?) fears that the aftermath of the pandemic will bring a return "to normal," the author also foregrounds the political potentialities of the new, pandemic-borne, self-organized infrastructures of care.

"Within and Against Racial Segregation: Notes from Italy's Encampment Archipelago," < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/within-against-racial-segregation-italys-encampment-archipelago-peano/> > by Irene Peano, reflects on the exceptional and the ordinary of the pandemic as it is lived and experienced by West African migrants working in Southern Italy's agricultural districts in highly exploitative conditions. The author reads the COVID-19-borne measures of isolation and segregation in a continuum with the pre-pandemic past. Against this background of structural violence, Peano invites us to read some migrants' refusal to accept the "surplus of segregation" brought by the pandemic as a form of resistance.

The second set of two contributions foregrounds affectivities of disorientation and liminality⁴⁸ emerging amid the COVID-19 pandemic, encompassing fears of a return to "normality," reminiscences of the silenced past, and hope in what can come afterward.

"Bewilderment, Hope, and Despair" < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/bewilderment-hope-despair-mouritzen-mcgowan-samson/> > is a collective and poetic narration of a state of in-between-ness, rising amidst despair for the current predicament and hope in new worlds to come. By relinquishing the allure of "normality," authors Lasse Mouritzen, Madeleine Kate McGowan, and Kristine Samson explore various states of affect "like temporary landscapes or glimpses of a new world." While allowing the

surfacing of the ruins of the “other worlds, previous times” on whose spoils the present has been rapaciously built upon, they suggest that the pandemic-borne restlessness, disorientation, and despair, also enable the conditions for collectively imagining an otherwise.

Paulina Lanz’s “Cycles of Quotidian Pandemic Instances: Voice(less) Stories from 1918” < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/cycles-of-quotidian-pandemic-instances-voiceless-stories-from-1918-lanz/>> provides temporal depth to the present-day affectivities engulfing and entangling humans living amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. It invites us to attune to the vibrato of the hum—the modality of the quiet that connects us to the feelings of loss we cannot articulate into words⁴⁹—and with it, to the knowledge of a silenced past. By retrieving the memories of what went unlearned across waves of “history, sound, and pandemics,” the author suggests that the hum can serve “as a collective resonance for solidarities and empathy.”

The final third set of three contributions underlines the potentialities of learning to practice—in and through the pandemic—more equal, inclusive relationalities within and across species.

“The Green Color of Grief: Spider-Human Dreams,” < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/the-green-color-of-grief-spider-human-dreams-stankovic-paganelli/>> by Snežana Stanković and Linda Paganelli, is the “dream-time diary” of a Spider-Human. Moving across space with its silk trains, the narrator evokes the stillness, silence, and grief emerging from the pandemic-afflicted cities. In so doing, it leverages a post-human critique of the political economy underpinning the unequal valuing of humans, as foregrounded by the premature and unmourned death of so many people. Drawing from Christina Sharpe’s notion of the “wake,”⁵⁰ and Anna Tsing’s call for “collaborative survival,” it invites us to think of mutuality within and across species.⁵¹

In “Plants, Vegetables, Lawn: Radical Solidarities in Pandemic Times,” Gi < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/plants-vegetables-lawn-radical-solidarities-pandemic-times-carabelli/>> ulia Carabelli discusses the affectivities of “joy, hope, and reassurance” that humans relayed while caring for their plants. Rather than an apology for retreating into the home and/or into nature in search of individualized comfort and safety, the author reads these caring relationships politically,⁵² for the emancipatory potential that radical interspecies solidarities hold in the construction of “more just and inclusive” futures.

The theme of hope reemerges powerfully in the forum’s final contribution: “Finding Joy and Elegy: Poetry from Pandemic,” < <https://csalateral.org/forum/corona-affects-effects/finding-joy-elegy-poetry-pandemic-karioris/>> by Frank G. Karioris. By drawing from the poetry that blossomed during the pandemic, the author reflects on the quarantine as a fertile, seeding time and an opportunity to understand “the importance of interrelationality and change” for moving towards a post-pandemic world. Like the multitude of leaves on a tree, Karioris invites us to “foster connection between fractured insurgencies,”⁵³ and to “break away from our rotting and towards a growth that is contingent and reliant on community, collaboration, and creativity.”

In reflecting on the contributions to this forum, we sense that the pandemic, despite the magnitude of its ongoing tragedy, has opened up the possibilities for recasting the future through the affective registers of dissent and hope for existing in/into and through the world. As Amanda Gorman so eloquently evoked,

When day comes, we ask ourselves, where can we find light in this never-ending shade?

The loss we carry. A sea we must wade.

We braved the belly of the beast.





We've learned that quiet isn't always peace,












and the norms and notions of what 'just' is isn't always justice.⁵⁴


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Notes

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